New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1956

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Uncle Willie"

New York Post

December 21, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

Menasha Skulnik Carries a Burden

Is there anyone who doesn't know by now that Menasha Skulnik is one of the most delightful of comedians? Can anyone be unaware of his beguiling talent for being at once hilarious, touching, lovable and shamelessly sly? He can also come remarkably close to performing miracles. Last night at the John Golden Theater, there were times when he almost made it seem that a ramshackle comedy called "Uncle Willie" wasn't such a bad play, which is certainly a feat verging on the miraculous.

The truth is that "Uncle Willie" can be given credit for having a good heart, but for very little else. Yet when the Menasha Mauler is wheedling unsuspecting people into matrimony, winning the affection of sullen children, gaining the confidence of an embittered Irish widow, interfering lovingly in other men's business or being dreadfully but temporarily hurt by lack of appreciation for his efforts, it somehow becomes difficult to realize how frail his vehicle really is.

Comic Touch

If almost any other actor went in for the sort of woebegone sheepishness that seems to overwhelm this remarkable Mr. Skulnik, I'm sure we would accuse him of the terrible crime of coyness. But when our boy goes in for this dangerous phase of his repertoire, it is immediately transformed into something wondrously and uniquely comic, and everything appears right with the world. In a comparatively few words, "Uncle Willie" isn't much of a play, but Uncle Willie is a rare comic portrait.

Julie Berns and Irving Elman, the authors of "Uncle Willie," have gone for their narrative to what might be called the "Abie's Irish Rose" theory of comedy, even though there is no interracial romance involved. This questionable theory is based on the idea that the Jews and the Irish are constantly bickering and having tantrums and displaying mutual disapproval, but are, under their cantankerous exteriors, the salt of the earth and very fond of each other.

The Error

The only objection I have to this conception is that, while both its Jews and Irish are supposed to be basically very lovable, they have a tendency to emerge as chiefly bad tempered and petty. It isn't supposed to work out this way, but it unfortunately does. As for the play's dialogue, it consists of such lines as "Don't leave the ship until the last rat has left." I fear "Uncle Willie" isn't properly equipped for the tough Broadway battle, even though its star assuredly is.

Mr. Skulnik, I want to emphasize, is not only funny and appealing, but presents a perfect portrait of a meddler with a heart of gold. There are other good performances, also, especially by Arline Sax as Willie's petulent ward, Norman Feld as her husband, John Connell as a pleasant Irish policeman, and Nita Talbot as an interminably talkative neighbor. There isn't much to be said on behalf of "Uncle Willie," but Menasha Skulnik is, as always, a treasure.

"UNCLE WILLIE"

Comedy by Julie Berns and Irving Elman; staged by Robert Douglas; costumes by Guy Kent; presented by Albert Lewis and Samuel Schulman in association with I. B. Joslow at the John Golden Theatre, December 20, 1956. The cast:

Uncle Willie....Menasha Skulnik
Leo.....Norman Feld
Esther.....Arline Sax
Sheila.....Elaine Lynn
Kathy.....Eileen Merry
Peggy.....Kathy Dunn
Charlie.....John Connell
Francey.....Nita Talbot
Mrs. Simon....Dorothy Raymond
Ellen.....Edith Fellows
Sgt. McNamara.....Martin Rudy
Mr. Smith.....Gaylord Mason
The Victim.....John Phelps

New York Herald Tribune

December 21, 1956

THEATER

'Uncle Willie'

By WALTER KERR

WHENEVER Menasha Skulnik has succeeded in improving matters at the Golden—by marrying off somebody who doesn't want to get married, renting an upstairs flat to a woman with four children, talking an Irishwoman out of going back to Ireland—he keels around toward the footlights, opens his dachshund eyes wide, reaches over his shoulder to pat himself on the back, and chortles approvingly "Willie, you're wonderful!"

Menasha, you're wonderful.

• • •

But this is a play? Come to think of it, "Uncle Willie" may prove to be an extremely valuable contribution to the theater, and I suggest that scholars impound it immediately. It is just possible that authors Julie Berns and Irving Elman have assembled in one authoritative reference-work every basic comic situation, every basic joke, and every basic vaudeville routine from the period covering the years 1912-1922. To be more specific about it, we now have the full range of dramatic invention from "The Cohens and Kellys" to "McFadden's Flats" thoroughly and unforgettably documented, and they can't take that away from us.

• • •

Line gags? Try these. "That roof leaks," says a prospective tenant. "Only when it rains," says Uncle Willie. Where is Uncle Willie from? You've got it—from Linsk, between Minsk and Pinsk.

Scrambled sayings? A blonde girl named Nita Talbot keeps charging in and out, saying, "You can't pull the wool under my nose" as she comes, and "A bird in the hand is worth a pig in the poke" as she goes.

Vaude routines? Menasha and a straight man stand in front of a colorful Ralph Alswang set that looks as much like an old Palace back-drop as a respectable set can, wave their arms at each other, and go right through the bits about Menasha being dragged into a clothing store, Menasha collecting rent from his landlord, Menasha explaining how five years and one year are really the same thing.

Sentiment? We've got it all. A wife who can have no children tenderly nurses a rose-bush while a golden-haired tot offers her a doll to keep. For the finale, a Christmas tree shines in the upstairs window and a Chanukah candle flickers on the floor below. The author of "Abie's Irish Rose" should turn in her typewriter for having missed that one.

• • •

Okay, now you know. Let's get on to the only thing worth talking about, which is Mr. Skulnik, that forlorn delight. He comes in carrying a suitcase, and looking rather like one. He tucks his head into his shoulders like a wistful turtle, lets his coat-sleeves drop down to the very last finger-joint, moves across the stage as though his soles were magnetized to the floor, and produces a variety of fascinating sounds by letting his upper lip vibrate against his nasal cavity.

Oh, he sometimes picks up his feet. There are a couple of magnificent moments when he is slowly moving up and down on his toes so like a rocking-horse somebody has just abandoned. There are further magnificent moments when he is spraying cigarette ash over the front-row customers in happy elan, when he is curling his fists against his teeth in woebegone anxiety, when he is making a policeman listen to reason by bleating: "Why should you waste an arrest?" In fact, all Mr. Skulnik has to do to convulse everybody within hearing is to descend a rickety flight of stairs and say, "Hello, McNamara." He's that kind of a genius.

But I've told you about that play.

Daily Mirror

December 21, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

Menasha Skulnik Is Superb 'Uncle Willie'

• Masterful comedian rises above a limited script.

The trouble with "Uncle Willie" is that it matches a lightweight comedy against a heavy-weight comedian. The latter would be Menasha Skulnik, that immensely funny and irresistibly ingratiating actor. Like wine, Skulnik improves with age.

After mastering his craft in East Side musicals over the years, he finally invaded the Broadway legit. Triumphantly, too. First in "The Fifth Season," then "The Flowering Peach" and now "Uncle Willie." His current vehicle, be it reported, is the least worthy of the trio.

JULIE BERNS and Irving Elman have tailored it from stock material, and the marvelous Menasha deserves something better than that. Like every great comic, he has the ability to put a tear beneath the lustiest of laughs. And, with rare wizardry, he can make dross almost pass for gold.

Uncle Willie is an amiable little man who peddles notions from the Battery to the Bronx. He not only gives his customers value, but helps them solve their problems with warmth and understanding. When the girl he loved married another, he decided to remain a bachelor.

But he adopted the world. He brought his niece over from Linsk, half-way between Pinsk and Minsk, and married her off to a young plumber. He also inveigled them into buying a two-family house in the Bronx, when that booming borough was practically a million miles from nowhere.

Next he rented the top floor to an Irish cop with a wife and four kids. When it looked as though the Frankels and the Donegans weren't going to hit it off, Uncle Willie took care of the problem in stride. As cleverly as a wily diplomat could have done in the international field.

SO EVERYTHING TURNED out all right for everyone, including Uncle Willie. Just as it should for such a nice little fellow as Skulnik. When you like people, they most often just have to like you back. If there were more Uncle Willies around, this globe would be a happier place on which to live.

With a lift of the eyebrow, a shrug of the shoulder, a movement of a hand, Skulnik can make you roar. And, with the howls, he mates heart and humanity.

Nita Talbot, as a gabby, blonde shrew, can talk faster than a Bronx express travels. Her humor is sharp and accurate. Norman Feld, Arline Sax, Elaine Lynn, Eileen Merry, Kathy Dunn, John Connell, Edith Fellows, Dorothy Raymond and Martin Rudy are other stalwarts in the cast.

WE SUSPECT "Uncle Willie" is for a special, limited audience. Its major asset is the superb Skulnik. And you can spell SUPERB with capital letters.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 21, 1956

There's a Good Scrooge Tonight

By TOM DONNELLY.

"Uncle Willie" (at the Golden) is approximately as shapely as a cheese blintz run through the ringer twice. It is also violently sentimental. By any remotely elevated critical standard it is a deplorable enterprise. And yet I must confess that I found it a most welcome little diversion. Ah well, Christmas comes but once a year.

There is no need to be apologetic about admiring Menasha Skulnik, who plays the title character. Mr. Skulnik is a genius. He is as melancholy as a whole chorus of Hamlets, and his every mournful movement is a source of joy.

Bronx Climate.

Uncle Willie is a peddler, philosopher, marriage broker, and, you'll excuse the expression, a Little Mr. Fixit. He operates in the Bronx during the first 10 years of this century in a neighborhood crammed with people in need of fixing.

The curtain goes up, Uncle Willie approaches the footlights, and right away we get a weather report. "The Bronx!" he cries. "In the summer you roast like a chicken. In the winter? Siberia!"

Uncle Willie has an unattached niece to dispose of. A plumber ambles into view. Pressed for economic details, the plumber admits: "I'm stayin' alive." That's enough for Uncle Willie, who immediately offers his niece in marriage. ("A gorgeous girl. With a head of hair!")

War Breaks Out.

A wedding takes place, the young people set up housekeeping, Uncle Willie rents the top floor to a jovial Irish policeman with an irascible wife and three small girls, two of them cheerful Snow Whites and the third a dour Rose Red.

War breaks out, in the style of "The Cohens and Kellys" of several decades ago. Such hissing and shouting and misunderstandings! At first Uncle Willie's niece despises the Irish children, but in no time at all she comes to love them as her own. This kindles fury in the heart of their mother. Presently the mother is widowed. Fresh complications. Does Uncle Willie find a new mate for the widow? Does he melt the flinty heart of that disagreeable Rose Red? Does he settle the hash of an aggressive young spinster who intrudes upon the random proceedings from time to time, causing severe discomfort with her every arrival? You can just bet Uncle Willie does.

Menasha's the Man.

Mr. Skulnik is the very man to hold a vaudeville like this together. He knows how to groan in a range of 12 octaves. Make that 24 octaves. He is a virtuoso of the shrug. He circles a prospective husband for one of his clients with the hopping enthusiasm of a crafty sparrow eying the most succulent worm in the garden.

Whenever his vehicle seems about to get hopelessly stalled in a sugary rut, or in a bog of elementary melodrama, Mr. Skulnik starts things humming again with sound advice on how to manage a proposal ("Take her to the zoo and ask her next to the monkey cage; a man always looks better next to a monkey"), or with a kindly tribute to a deaf musician ("He makes a beautiful dollar, he plays by ear"), or simply by treating the spectator to a display of that crumpled, weary charm that was refined in the course of a very long service in the theaters of Second Ave. and is unique on Broadway.

A Tasty Mishmash.

If the authors of "Uncle Willie," Julie Berns and Irving Elman, can't be accused of having constructed a distinguished theater piece, they deserve at least a minimum credit for having provided a sterling performer with a sufficient showcase. And in a day when a good many epic vulgarities pass without challenge, it must be said that "Uncle Willie," for all that it is a jumble of widows and orphans and shamrocks and bagels, is consistently tasteful.

Mr. Skulnik gets first rate support from Nita Talbot, Edith Fellows, John Connell, and the three juvenile actresses: Elaine Lynn, Eileen Merry and Kathy Dunn. Robert Douglas has done a good job of staging this primitive extravaganza.

Journal American

December 21, 1956

Skulnik Tries But Play Fails To Come Alive

By JOHN McCLAIN

It is difficult to determine just what's the matter with "Uncle Willie," the new Menasha Skulnik vehicle which opened at the John Golden Theatre last night. Menasha, certainly one of our foremost comics, serves as the principal figure and narrator; he is busy most of the evening and is beguiling and often very funny.

But it seemed to me that he fought an uphill and futile battle with a lot of characters who never came to life. The proceedings took on somewhat the quality of an over-long vaudeville act, something written to display his talents—never mind about anybody else.

These are stock characters: the immigrant niece he must look after, the prolific Irish cop and his family who move in upstairs, the garrulous girl and her widowed mother. Skulnik's reactions to them are sometimes amusing, his monologues almost always are, but the impact of the play itself is feeble.

The idea is simple enough: a kind-hearted Bronx merchant finds himself saddled with a newly-arrived relative he didn't know existed. He gets her married, he lends the couple the money to buy a house, and for the remainder of the evening he is involved in solving their mounting problems. It did not strike me that these problems were either highly original or engrossing, and I never learned enough about the people to care much what happened to them.

Casting Problem

Part of this at least may have been a casting problem. Skulnik is obviously ideal as the charitable little peddler who wends his saintly course through the reaches of the Bronx. But I didn't believe Arline Sax, as the niece, looked or behaved like an immigrant hot off the boat from Russia. Nita Talbot, a splendid actress, made a spirited attempt to impersonate an East Side shrew, but again I thought it missed fire.

Edith Fellows and John Connell were better situated as the Irish couple upstairs, and Norman Feld was believable as the young plumber who marries the niece. There were also good contributions by a trio of sprouts: Elaine Lynn, Eileen Merry and Kathy Dunn. Dorothy Raymond was capable in the role of the widow.

Ralph Alswang's single set of a small house and surroundings in upper Manhattan, 1905, was pleasant and practical. "Uncle Willie" is all Menasha Skulnik, which is perfectly fine—only he ought to surround himself with brighter people.

DAILY NEWS

December 21, 1956

'Uncle Willie' Simple Comedy, but Skulnik Is a Superb Comedian

By JOHN CHAPMAN

There cannot be anything Menasha Skulnik does not know about folksy comedy; he is an artist—purely and simply an artist, and a very lovable one. His new play, "Uncle Willie," which opened last evening at the John Golden Theatre, is an unashamedly sentimental and folksy theatrical rattletrap, and I had a heart-warming time watching it and him.

Heaven forbid that I should mention such a dirty word as "Abie's Irish Rose"—but, as Uncle Willie might say with a disarming shrug, why not? After all, this new comedy consists entirely of Willie's getting two quarrelsome families, one Irish and one Jewish, on a peacetime basis. It's just too bad that Willie wasn't down there at the Suez Canal before the fuss started.

A Fine Setting

The curtain of "Uncle Willie" rises on a splendid setting by Ralph Alswang—a two-family house with outside stairs way up in the Bronx. The time is maybe 50 years ago. Down the sidewalk alongside the house comes Willie, lugging his salesman's case. He puts it down to rest a bit, and he takes us into his confidence.

It started, he says, when somebody shipped him a young niece from the old country, so he decided to marry her. To somebody else, he means. So he fixes this up, and the young couple take this house in the Bronx, which is developing fast because of the new elevated subway. Next he fixes it for an Irish cop and his lively brood to take the apartment upstairs. Naturally, this situation takes a lot of unfixing, which Willie blandly manages. And so on, until curtain time.

He Fixes Everything

But Skulnik is, as I say, an artist. He could talk a bird out of a tree, so it should be no trick at all for him to talk a large and affectionate audience into the Golden Theatre. I want to go again if only to hear him explain to a flatfoot police sergeant how it is that he, a door-to-door salesman, has managed to wear the same pair of shoes six years. The trick, he says to the sarge, is to walk lightly—and he demonstrates it. I want to hear him say again to another cop, "Don't think for a moment I'm French. I'm not."

The authors, Julie Berns and Irving Elman, have written their simple comedy with straight faces, and under the direction of Robert Douglas all the actors, including Uncle Willie, play it straight. Since they believe all this sentimental nonsense, why shouldn't I? Well, I think I'd believe anything if Menasha Skulnik told it to me.

It's a nice company Uncle Willie has with him—Arline Sax as the imported niece, Norman Feld as her husband, Elaine Lynn and John Connell as the Irish couple and several others whose lives he has to straighten out. Thanks, Willie. I even feel better myself.

The New York Times

December 21, 1956

Theatre: 'Uncle Willie'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALTHOUGH Menasha Skulnik is not down on the program as one of the authors of "Uncle Willie," it is hard to tell where the line should be drawn.

In the billing at the John Golden, where the play opened last evening, the authorship is credited to Julie Berns and Irving Elman, and the direction to Robert Douglas. But "Uncle Willie" is a compound of a heavy-handed "Abie's Irish Rose' plot and all the comic things that Mr. Skulnik can do by himself. Since he is one of the drollest clowns on the stage anywhere, it would be gratifying if the plot could be thrown out altogether.

Not to mince words, he is great. A short, sad little man with a melancholy face, a tear-drenched voice and a shrug where his shoulders should be, he can convulse and move the audience simultaneously. "Uncle Willie" presents him as a folk character in a folk tale. He sells people anything they want, brings couples together, arranges for burial lots, solves all problems and is good to everyone.

In anyone else, this universal goodness would be too rich to be digested. But he can make everything triumphantly funny or sentimental—by moving his voice into a new register, looking at the audience quizzically, raising one finger, pausing for a moment, or hopping first on one foot and then the other. He communicates. His fingers, his eyes, his mouth, his shoulders and feet tell you everything you need to know. The dialogue is merely something extra.

•

The play involves him in the affairs of a two-family house in the Bronx where a Jewish couple lives on the first floor and an Irish family on the second. In the last scene, Hanukkah candles appear in the window of the first floor and a Christmas tree on the second.

Since Mr. Skulnik is a simple clown, a simple story ought to be the proper setting for his pantomime and acting. But it takes a writer of skill and taste to make a simple story beautiful and not maudlin. Although "Uncle Willie's" heart is in the right place, it is wholly lacking in taste. It is as innocent of literary content as the Saturday night Yiddish entertainments downtown. Although Mr. Skulnik has come uptown, his heart belongs to Second Avenue.

When he is on stage, the meretriciousness of the story does not matter. Purely as a story-teller in the prologue, he is captivating. He can make the artless narrative funny, touching and thoroughly human. Now and then he stops the plot long enough to tell amusing anecdotes informally. He also interpolates disarming turns and encores out of his repertory.

Some other pleasant actors fill in the background for him. Norman Feld and Arline Sax as the Jewish couple, John Connell and Nita Talbot as the Irish couple, Elaine Lynn, Eileen Merry and Kathy Dunn as lively Irish children give Mr. Skulnik agreeable playmates. And Ralph Alswang has designed a symbolic setting that promises a legendary tale of the Bronx.

But they all need authors and editors. Piecing an entertainment together out of sure-fire bits is not good enough for the adult theatre. Mr. Skulnik has too much comic genius for this kind of hackwork. Writers wanted!

"Speaking of Murder"

Daily Mirror

December 20, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Speaking of Murder' A Mediocre Thriller

• Crime certainly doesn't pay at. Royale playhouse.

"Speaking of Murder," a robustious bit of it was committed at the Royale Theatre Wednesday evening. That's when Courtney Burr and Burgess Meredith unleashed the "new thriller" on a hapless audience. Be it reported that the first-nighters bore up bravely under fire from Audrey and William Roos.

It seems that a busty blonde named Annabelle Logan had a yen for a wealthy architect named Charles Ashton. So she pushed his first wife off a balcony and locked his second in an airtight vault. Spouse No. 2 was an amiable actress who liked dogs and kids.

BETWEEN BUMP-OFFS, human and canine, the British menace found time to turn the Ashton youngsters against their stepmother. She was quite a card, that Annabelle. Thwarted in the end by a Westchester gendarme and a juvenile Jimmy Valentine, she entombs herself in the big safe intended for the Hollywood doll. And good riddance, we say.

Now, don't get the idea that the Audrey and William Roos melodrama is quite as bad as it sounds from the above. It's merely a mediocre chiller-diller. In skillful hands, it might have filled the bill.

But Messrs. Burr and Meredith, usually astute casters, ranged all the way to England for an actress to impersonate the dastardly Annabelle. They thought they had found her in Brenda de Banzie, a well-upholstered babe who has starred in shockers for such maestros of the macabre as Alfred Hitchcock, Charles Laughton and Emlyn Williams.

Miss DeBanzie's list of credits, stage and screen, is formidable. So perhaps some of the blame for her debacle in "Speaking of Murder" must go to director Delbert Mann.

THE CUSTOMERS MET the impact of her onslought with good humor. Instead of hissing the villain, they hissed the villainess.

Incidentally, "Speaking of Murder" is not without fun. For when that brilliant comedienne, Estelle Winwood, as a blackmailing, bibulous biddy matched words and wits with Miss De Banzie, there were moments to cheer in West 45th Street. La Winwood remains one of the drama's best scene-stealers. She can hold her own with anyone in the business.

"SPEAKING OF MURDER"

Play by Audrey and William Roos; staged by Delbert Mann; setting and lighting by Frederick Fox; costumes by Alice Gibson; presented by Courtney Burr and Burgess Meredith at the Royale Theatre, December 19, 1956. The cast:

Ricky Ashton.....Billy Quinn
Janie Ashton.....Virginia Gerry
Connie Barnes Ashton.....
Neva Patterson
Charles Ashton....Lorne Greene
Annabelle Logan..Brenda de Banzie
Mrs. Walworth....Estelle Winwood
Mildred.....Brook Byron
Mitchell.....Robert Mandan

Neva Patterson, as the second Mrs. Ashton; Lorne Greene, as the Ashton himself and Billy Quinn, as a youthful victim of diabolism, played with sincerity and effect. They refused to permit over-acting and mis-direction to spoil their histrionic shots.

Frederick Fox, one of our favorite scenic designers, has devised a setting that is at once antiquely opulent and rightfully sinister.

WELL, "SPEAKING of Murder" proves once again what the late Arthur Brisbane so often told us: Crime doesn't pay.

DAILY NEWS

December 20, 1956

'Speaking of Murder' a Pleasant Shedunit With an Able Company

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Last evening's new melodrama at the Royale Theatre, "Speaking of Murder," isn't a whodunit; it's a shedunit. It wouldn't take even Dr. Watson more than a minute to suspect that Brenda de Banzie, who is always so coolly poised, is up to murder. This makes this drama, which is agreeably acted by everybody, a howzit; the suspense lies in keeping the audience wondering howzit going to happen, and also whenzit.

The suspense, however, is not too alarming, for everybody knowzit. Sooner or later a certain character in this play is going to open the walk-in safe in a rich commuter's house and rescue the handsome Neva Patterson from suffocation.

Audience Worries

This piece, by Audrey and William Roos, is entertaining and attractively acted, and it has a very handsome library setting by Frederick Fox. The first-nighters showed quite plainly that they were worried about Miss Patterson's safety, so "Speaking of Murder" might run for a bit. After all, practically nobody alive but me has seen "Alias Jimmy Valentine."

Miss de Banzie, from England, is an accomplished menace who hates Miss Patterson because Miss Patterson is married to Lorne Greene and she—de Banzie—wants him. Her plot to stifle her rival might come off, too, if it weren't that Estelle Winwood is onto her. Miss Winwood is a very funny, gin-drinking blackmailer who knows too much about de Banzie's past. The key to the plot is held by young Billy Quinn, a manful little moppet, and it is safe in his hands.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 20, 1956

Somebody Forgot The Combination

By TOM DONNELLY.

The villainess in "Speaking of Murder" (at the Royale) is named Annabelle, and it is Annabelle's aim in life to lock up her rival, a nice girl named Connie, in a vault for a minimum of two hours, which Annabelle calculates is enough to produce total suffocation.

There are two quite hilarious moments in "Speaking of Murder." One comes when Annabelle totters into the library, where the vault is, complains of a sprained ankle, collapses full length on the floor and snarles at Connie to cease ministering to her and get that fur coat in storage for the summer. Connie obliges, and slam!, Annabelle is leaning against the door, leeringly triumphant.

The curtain rises on a subsequent scene, a clock is chiming softly, and there is Annabelle, modeling a handsome red hostess gown and smiling luxuriously at the thought that Connie must have turned black in the face by now, or at least a promising tombstone gray.

She's a Bad One.

Oh, I tell you, Annabelle is a bad one. She is not unmotivated. She doesn't push people in that vault just because it happens to be there. It is Connie's husband she is after. She is after him in a permanent way, that is. There are hints that Annabelle and the man who pays the bills have enjoyed a guilty interlude. But he keeps slipping through her fingers.

There was a wife before Connie. Annabelle shoved that one out of a window, or tossed her down a cliff, or something. Somehow or other, Annabelle has managed to stay on in the household, scheming and conniving and setting Connie's stepson against her, and doing all manner of dreadful things with a grin that would seem excessive on a Cheshire cat full of canaries. You or I wouldn't tolerate that grin for 10 seconds, but you know how the characters in melodramas are, so oblivious and trusting.

Comic Relief.

If the funniest moments in "Speaking of Murder" are the result of miscalculations on the part of the authors, Audrey and William Roos, and the leading actress, Brenda de Banzie, there are a number of other passages which are clearly intended to provide comic relief, and do so. Most of these involve Estelle Winwood, as a whimsical blackmailer.

Every now and then Miss Winwood pops into the library, calls for a large slug of gin, and delicately complains that she isn't being paid enough money for hugging to her bosom her knowledge of the murder of that first wife. Upon learning that a fresh homicide is on the fire, she murmurs, "Of course, my dear, I shall have to raise my rates."

Miss Winwood has gotten herself up like a gypsy from Sutton Pl., and as she weaves about the stage in her modish rags, and rolls those enormous eyes of hers in discreet appreciation of Annabelle's depravities, she is a joy to behold.

Answer Is No.

But can a thriller afford quite so much comic relief? Or, to put it specifically, is "Speaking of Murder" so tensely compelling that if we didn't get 10 minutes of laughs at half-hour intervals we wouldn't be able to stand the strain? Unhappily, the answer is no. "Speaking of Murder" is as taut as a string on a 10-cent violin.

Granted that Annabelle is not one of the subtlest studies of vicious femininity in the history of the drama, Miss de Banzie has made the least of a dubious opportunity. The actress begins by shouting her lines with the echoing artifice that is usually associated with inferior revivals of "The School for Scandal," and as the evening dawdles along she moderates her approach to a degree that is only slightly more in harmony with the sober requirements.

Others in Cast.

Lorne Greene probably does all that could be done with the dull role of the man in the case, and there is a nice performance by Billy Quinn as the young son of the troubled household.

The attractive Neva Patterson plays the hapless second wife, and a fine job she does of it, too. Miss Patterson has warmth, grace and an easy vitality. She does not succeed in persuading us that she would be dumb enough to step into a vault at the invitation of a lady obviously itching to call it curtains, but I think that's decidedly to her credit.

The New York Times

December 20, 1956

Theatre: Shudder Show

By BROOKS ATKINSON

EVERYONE who sees "Speaking of Murder," which opened at the Royale last evening, will learn at least one good lesson. Don't have a soundproof, moth-proof storage vault in the library. Or, if you do, don't have Brenda de Banzie, the British blonde, slinking around the house in smart frocks and taking over control of your ménage.

This bulletin is written by one theatregoer who in the beginning did not believe that Miss de Banzie would be ruthless enough to throw the thick door of the vault on a good-looking actress like Neva Patterson and leave her there to suffocate slowly. But, by golly, that's exactly what Miss de Banzie does, looking as cool as a duchess and considerably sweeter.

●

"Speaking of Murder" is a shudder show written by Audrey and William Roos with poison in their hearts. The circumstances are a little anomalous at first. Charles Ashton, the celebrated architect, who has a library thirteen shelves high, has just married a celebrated movie actress to replace his first wife, lost—or pushed—in a fatal accident. Annabelle Logan, his first wife's friend, and quite a dish, has taken over the house, the children and the servants, and has also consoled the widower once or twice surreptitiously, and does not intend to be eliminated without a struggle. Hence the vault.

As a shudder show, "Speaking of Murder" is not prime grade. The authors and Delbert Mann, the director, have to do some fancy foot-work to keep up with the plotting, which is complicated. But the play is generally enjoyable in a macabre sort of way—especially when Estelle Winwood undulates in and out as a raffish old crone who loves blackmailing a friend and becomes reconciled to murder, although at first she regards it as distasteful.

For the good of the plot, the authors have to bump her off half way through the play. It is a pity. For Mrs. Winwood's elegant manners, chilling smile and hauteur are vastly amusing in a vein of Dickensian comedy. Nothing is ever quite the same after the authors write her out of the play.

●

Still there's the horror of suffocation in a vault to comfort the audience. For the setting Frederick Fox has designed an overpowering library. Although no one could read a book there, it's a suitable place for murder. Lorne Greene plays the kindly though overpatient husband like a gentleman of the old school. As a boy cruelly victimized by his elders, Billy Quinn gives a likable performance. Everyone behaves very well, as a matter of fact.

But don't have a storage vault in the library. Let your friends steal your books. Who cares?

Journal American

December 20, 1956

Brilliant Cast Makes Corny Villainy Count

By JOHN McCLAIN

THIS DEPONENT is a solid sucker for almost any theatrical murder-melodrama and is hence strenuously in favor of a new one, "Speaking of Murder," which opened last night at the Royale Theatre.

We haven't had good, corny villainy around for too long, and I think this frantic bit of implausibility, catered to by a group of experienced and genial ghouls, should find a welcome audience.

For I do not believe that anybody approaches a show of this stripe without making enormous allowances. Audrey and William Roos, the authors, take us to the library of a luxurious house in Westport, Conn., and introduce us to a most useful gimmick: it is a vault which would make Willie Sutton shudder. It is located right there amid the books; the walls are 14 inches thick; it is soundproof, air-proof and shock-proof, and it becomes the busiest little locale this side of Macy's mezzanine.

Secretary Is Irked

It appears that the gentleman of the house has recently entered into a second marriage with an actress, but has been stupid enough to retain in the household a secretary with whom he had apparently indulged in an interim romance. I hardly need to tell you that this irks the secretary, and this is a girl who, when irked, will irk back.

By a series of machinations which need not be relayed she gets everything into that vault but the family phaeton. First it is the dog, as a sort of guinea pig (to see how long it will take him to snuff); then milady's fur coat and, finally, milady.

Well, I think it is unfair to start thinking about how many of your friends have vaults like the Chemical Corn Exchange Bank in their libraries, or why these should be hermetically sealed. I didn't even mind too much when it failed to dawn on anybody that the secretary might have had a motive for such sinister behavior and hence blamed the little boy. But I was troubled—only slightly, mind you—when they locked the dog up and nobody knew he was there. I have a dog and I will guarantee you could tie him in the middle of the Holland Tunnel at night and he would awaken every resident of Hoboken.

Brilliant Villainess

But this, as I say, is mere quibbling. The show is wonderfully well mounted and the cast is brilliant. Brenda de Banzie, the British import who plays the villainess, has a rare combination of beauty and off-beat gruesomeness. She succeeded, at one juncture, in drawing a sincere "Boo!" from the crowd.

Then there is Estelle Winwood, who gives another of those fragile impersonations of an elderly drunk that has kept her active these forty-odd years; and there is an entirely capable performance by Lorne Greene, as the stolid and utterly insensitive husband. Neva Patterson is particularly competent and attractive as the actress-wife, and she has a fine scene with little Billy Quinn, another amazingly expert boy actor.

The single set of the library by Frederick Fox is excellent and Delbert Mann's direction seems well-paced and sure.

"Speaking of Murder" will not be everybody's cup of hemlock, but for those who like that sort of thing it is a delightfully sinister evening in the theatre.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
December 20, 1956

THEATER

'Speaking of Murder'

By WALTER KERR

THERE are quite a few astonishing things in "Speaking of Murder," but I imagine that to a good many people the most astonishing will be the fact that a nine-year-old boy vanishes upstairs, takes a bath and returns fully dressed in exactly two and a half minutes. Since I know from my own vast experience that this is perfectly possible, I feel obligated to believe everything else about the new mystery at the Royale, too.

* * *

As a matter of fact, you don't have to believe a word of it to enjoy it. An odd sort of jolly tolerance—part skepticism, part fascination, part simple delirium—is apt to sweep over you as you watch one of the vilest villainesses in recent literature send an innocent little dog to his untimely death, twist the mind of a child with a smirking and fiendish skill, and then spar about the handsomely oak-paneled living room until she has lured a ravishing movie star into an air-tight compartment. (Am I giving too much away?)

Certainly something like this combination of helpless resistance and irrational surrender got hold of the smiling customers at the Royale last night. When Brenda de Banzie, as the mistress of polite mayhem, walked on—in powder blue or shocking red—she was cheerfully hissed.

But when, during the cat-and-mouse questioning that flares up in the last act, an anxious but sober detective tried to drag a vital admission out of a terrified witness who was shaking his head "no," one ardent member of the first-night audience—he must have been hanging onto the back of the seat in front of him—helped hurry the investigation along by calling out a hoarse, rather passionate "Yes!"

* * *

In its engagingly idiotic way, the show gets to you. I'm sure that a lot of this is due to the simple, spectacular presence of Estelle Winwood on the stage. Miss Winwood, hung all over with untidy black accessories, appears as an ancient—and altogether too understanding—nurse to the wicked blonde lady who is prepared to dispose of man and beast alike.

Since this delectable crone is much "too proud to go on relief," she is now engaged in both blackmailing and protecting her one-time charge. Miss Winwood's way with blackmail is delicious. To watch her lift her large eyes heavenward and calculate to the precise decimal just how much murder she can afford to be associated with is to see Medusa herself returned to life. And to hear her snap "Do put the kettle on but don't put the gin away" is to remember, suddenly, what a truly professional inflection sounds like in the theater.

* * *

Seriously, Miss Winwood's bemused and cavalier cynicism, mocking the plotting of the piece even as she engages in it, goes a long way toward soothing any possible objections out front, and drawing us all into a giddy, delectable game. If there is another successful gambit that helps pull the whole thing off it is probably director Delbert Mann's canniness in seeing to it that every apprehensive actor on the premises plays as coolly, as casually and as intimately as possible.

The lines that Audrey and William Ross have written really belong to the "Just a minute!" school of melodrama, but young Billy Quinn makes them sound sensible and appealing, Neva Patterson snuggles up to them with a cozy charm, Lorne Greene lets them drop with a quiet confidence, and only Miss de Banzie overplays her hand now and then. But when your hand is composed of five aces, all spades, what are you going to do?

Clearly, school is out for the holidays. If you can just let your mind alone for two and one-half hours, you're going to find "Speaking of Murder" splendid fun.

New York Post

December 20, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Melodrama About a Murderess

The stubborn private theory of this reviewer that even a pretty fair murder melodrama is better than no murder melodrama at all was subjected to a severe test at the Royale Theater last night. Actually, it is stretching a few points to give Audrey and William Roos' "Speaking of Murder," which was having its first performance there, that high a rating, but what gave support to my axiom is that, for all its lethargic clumsiness and downright ineptness, the homicidal subject matter of the new play did provide a certain primitive interest that kept it from being a bore.

It should be pointed out at once that, while the Roos collaboration is a murder melodrama, it is not a murder mystery, save to the extent that its rather complicated exposition gives it a certain enigmatic quality. Any possibility that it was intended to puzzle you concerning the identity of an unknown assassin was ended as soon as Brenda de Banzie, who was allowed to offer no indication that she might be a subtle actress, made her first appearance. There is at least a certain frankness about Miss de Banzie's playing. She lets you know she's a villainess.

Dog Slayer

Don't place all the blame on the visiting English actress for this obviousness. It isn't merely that she is forced to indicate immediately that she has already been a murderess and is all set to try it again. The authors don't let her off that easily. Killers can be very sympathetic figures in modern melodramas, but poor Miss de Banzie is called upon without much delay to demonstrate that she is portraying an evil woman who is meant to be detested. She locks a little dog in a safe and suffocates it. That, of course, is completely out of bounds.

I don't mean to suggest, though, that "Speaking of Murder" is merely concerned with the slaughter of an innocent canine. That is just a sign of its central character's basic wickedness. The lady's chief interest in life is getting rid of any rivals who are foolhardy enough to marry the man for whose two children she is the governess. First, she turns the little son against the new wife and throws suspicion on him; then she sets out to destroy the interloper. Her plans, by the way, are handicapped by the presence of a female alcoholic who is blackmailing her.

Good Scene

There is one surprising thing about the new melodrama. While most of it is written in the stencils of its school, there is one scene not dealing with murder, and it's charming. This is a brief interlude in which the trapped wife wins the devotion of the boy who has been taught to hate her, and it is remarkably touching and real. For the rest of the time, the preoccupation is with past and impending homicide, and it isn't until the last of the three acts that it really gets down to business. I'm afraid that's a little too late to save the evening.

Although Miss de Banzie is called upon to be obvious in her villainy, she does play with force and candor. Estelle Winwood, an expert at portraying eerie harridans, is, as usual, excellent as the blackmailer, and Neva Patterson is skillful and forthright as the threatened wife, especially in the fine scene with the child. The boy is well played by young Billy Quinn, but I didn't think Lorne Greene helped greatly as the husband. "Speaking of Murder" seems to me unfortunately deficient as a thriller, but I must repeat that it didn't bore me.

"The Good Woman of Setzuan"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
December 19, 1956

THEATER

'The Good Woman of Setzuan'

By WALTER KERR

THE Phoenix Theater is unnaturally candid in its program note for Bertolt Brecht's "The Good Woman of Setzuan." It carefully points out that, in the "epic" drama of the late Mr. Brecht, all of the men and women are "ciphers." It further asks that we keep this fact in mind during the performance.

As it happens, nothing could be easier. For here is that normally skilful and sensitive gentlewoman, Uta Hagen, all decked out in a Chinese bob, a coolie coat, and a pair of ill-fitting trousers, and—sure enough—she is the very next thing to empty air. But the possibilities of reducing genuine talent to something quite close to zero are not yet fully explored.

In the course of Mr. Brecht's significant plotting—a virtuous woman is so betrayed by society that she must assume an evil mask in order to make ends meet—the aforesaid Miss Hagen returns decidedly altered. She is now decked out with a painted white forehead, a papier-machine nose, a Germanic mustache, and a cruel black derby. Does zero now become zero-plus-one? Not at all. Though Miss Hagen has two separate chances to shake us awake, the solemn vacuousness demanded of her must be faithfully preserved. Cipher Number Two has, if possible, even less substance that Cipher Number One.

Here, too, is Albert Salmi, formerly a player of vigor and lusty comic inventiveness, wringing his hands, staring at his pilot's boots, letting his jowls hang slack for fear some emotion should animate them. Indeed, of the thirty some figures who move vaguely in and out among the high bamboo poles, only Gerald Hiken—as a waterseller who is doing no business because of the inconsiderate rain—seemed to me to suggest that behind the sleepy styling there might lurk some faint, unprovoked passion.

Surely Brecht, whose praises have been sung these many postwar years, had something more invigorating in mind, some virile use of the physical theater as a whole to compensate for the deliberately drained characters. We shall have to wait for another management to show us where the kindling spark might conceivably be hidden.

As translator Eric Bentley has arranged things, the missing values don't seem to lie in the language. Phrase follows phrase in metronomic precision ("One cigarette butt and I'll be a new man," "Oh, that's very important—to be a new man"), rising now and then to a pale bit of irony ("She has the worst possible reputation—that of being poor") but generally calling it quits the moment grammar has been satisfied.

And as his own director, Mr. Bentley has given us no hint at all of the explosive manipulation of lights, sounds, properties and even customers for which Brecht has become famous. The machinery is unveiled—the sliding curtains, the elevated orchestra, the abrupt transitions, the cavalier introduction of song, the direct conversation with the folk out front—but in this instance it all seems a slightly sad echo of every constructivist theory advanced since 1922. Worst of all, though, are the leisurely and lugubrious speech rhythms Mr. Bentley has imposed on his earnest company; the pressure is low, the tone relaxed, the vitamin-content infinitesimal.

Brecht remains to be heard from.

"THE GOOD WOMAN OF SETZUAN"

Play by Bertolt Brecht, adapted by Eric Bentley; staged by Mr. Bentley; scenery and costumes by Wolfgang Roth; presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton at the Phoenix Theatre, December 18, 1956. The cast:

Wong	Gerald Hiken
First God	Gene Saks
Second God	Logan Ramsey
Third God	George Ebeling
1st Gentleman	Bart Murphy
Shen Te	Uta Hagen
2nd Gentleman	Richard Blackmarr
Mrs. Shin	Irene Dailey
Wife	Marion Paone
Husband	Gerald McGonagill
Carpenter	Byrne Piven
Sister-in-Law	Nancy Quint
Mrs. Mi Tzu	Nancy Marchand
Grandfather	Edward Morehouse
Boy	Louis Negin
Niece	Anne Meara
Policeman	Jerry Stiller
Carpet Dealer's Wife	Jenny Egan
Yang Sun	Albert Salmi
Shu Fu	Zero Mostel
Carpet Dealer	Mervin Williams
Mrs. Yang	Jane Hoffman

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 19, 1956

Small Oak From An Epic Acorn

By TOM DONNELLY.

"Those people are relentless!" muttered a gentleman in my vicinity at the Phoenix last night, where the late German playwright Bertolt Brecht's "The Good Woman of Setzuan" was being offered in a production adapted into English and directed by Eric Bentley.

The gentleman's subsequent grumblings made it abundantly clear that he was referring to the general policies of the Phoenix management, which has a fatal affinity for seldom-produced comedies from the Russian, and imitation Chinese plays, and marathon dramas wherein the characters are all disguised as vegetables and the message is that life is just a bushel of squashed cucumbers. (To be sure, they've never put on a play precisely like this last, but an experienced Phoenix customer may be forgiven for entertaining the suspicion that if such a work could be found, it would get a fast production on Second Ave.)

Droll Possibilities.

"The Good Woman of Setzuan" is by no means the worst of the Phoenix experiments. The play contains a notion with droll possibilities, even if the setting and characters ARE pseudo Chinese. Here's the notion: Shen Te, a prostitute with the traditional heart of gold, discovers that in order to get things done in a practical way she must disguise herself as a male cousin, Shui Ta. Shui Ta is mean clear through, but he gets to eat meat and hobnob with the mighty. An unemployed aviator catches the eye of Shen Te, seduces her, and exploits her mercilessly. Now then, Shui Ta knows that the pilot is no good, and is able to tell him so to his face. But when the pilot lays an amorous hand on Shen Te, she forgets everything that she knows as Shui Ta.

Did you follow me around that last bend? Whether or not, I maintain that the above little conceit has a sound humorous potential. And here we come to the great flaw of "The Good Woman of Setzuan," at least as it has been shaped by Mr. Bentley. It isn't at all amusing.

'Epic Theater.'

Mr. Bentley has for some time now been assuring the world that Bertolt Brecht is a genius, he has been explaining that Brecht has invented a whole new style called "Epic theater," and he has maintained that a highly specialized method of acting has had to be developed in order to realize the Brechtian intentions behind the footlights. We are told that Brecht is "not naturalistic." The prevailing tone is "abrupt," there is a direct communication between the actor and the spectator, the audience is a "group of guests" to whom the actor is telling a story.

Let us leave Brecht's other works out of the discussion and focus on "The Good Woman." It is a cluttered affair. It begins with three gods out to disprove a rumor that there is no goodness in the world. The gods march leadenly into and out of the proceedings as the evening

inches along. A small orchestra is perched on a platform high on the stage. Every now and then the orchestra plays minor strains, and every now and then the characters recite platitudinous little poems. True, the plot development is not naturalistic, but the individual scenes are about as stylized as a bunion plaster. Everything is laboriously explained, there are constant fretful interruptions and interpolations, and the glittering possibilities are buried under a mountain of odds and ends.

Gulf of Boredom.

The actors step up to the edge of the stage and address themselves to the house, but since they have no information to impart that is of any remote interest, the desired intimate communicaion is drowned in a gulf of boredom.

As for the performance, Mr. Bentley has not cajoled his troupe into anything recognizable as a special Brechtian approach. A number of the minor players affect a studied monotone, and some of them hiss and rattle with standard melodramatic intensity. Uta Hagen plays the title character in what seems to be more or less her usual manner, always allowing for the fact that sometimes she wears a derby and a mustache. Albert Salmi, as the cruel bird man, repeats substantially his cowboy from "Bus Stop." Nancy Marchand, as a lacquered landlady, is excellent. In fact, all of the actors filling major roles are effective enough in their various ways. But surely this is simply the grab-bag as before?

It is possible that Mr. Bentley is not Brecht's best friend, but his well-intentioned enemy.

Journal-American

December 19, 1956

Worthy Endeavor, With Fine Portrayals

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE ARE MANY kind things to be said about "The Good Woman of Setzuan," a new adaptation by Eric Bentley of the Bertolt Brecht play which opened at the Phoenix Theatre last night. It is almost always puzzling and therefore never quite dull, it offers several brilliant performances and an interesting and ingenious method of staging. It is a sort of enlarged, Chinese "Waiting for Godot."

Mr. Brecht's so-called "epic" approach to the theatre, we are told, looks beyond personal relationships to something that is "bigger." It is bigger, for example, than I (and I have porked up quite a bit lately) for I cannot be at all sure what Mr. Brecht is looking for. Let's take a guess and say it's the difference between good and evil.

In this diffuse consideration of the subject the author shows us that it is virtually impossible for one person to maintain strict standards of righteousness and still eat regularly.

The main character, a prostitute, is a thoroughly "good" woman, but when obliged by the friendly Gods to forsake her profession and launch forth into a career of sweetness and light she finds the odds stacked against her. Her only recourse is to assume a second identity, that of a male cousin, who can handle the ruthless and more practical matters which make her charitable inclinations effective.

This seems to indicate, if I dig Mr. Brecht, that we are all entitled to a great many liberties of conduct if justified by a worthy end. This is a philosophy that cannot be distasteful to a man who has just overdrawn his account to get through Christmas, but I do wish it were told in less fancy and oblique terms. I found it pretentious much of the time.

One of the forms of this style of playwriting requires the actors to come down from the stage and talk to the audience from an apron. There is nothing new in this, and I found that it seldom aided the play. There is music now and again, but it is strangely neo-Chinese, with a crazy clarinet, and none of the actors can really sing. It is all very well for everybody to try to be Rex Harrison, but the sad fact is that few of us are.

On the other hand, almost none of us are Uta Hagen, either, and she gives a charming and always incisive performance in the dual role of the prostitute and the fictitious cousin. Her rare gifts are given ample freedom here, and she brings reality to scenes which would flounder in symbolism in less commanding hands.

Good Account

Albert Salmi, late of "Bus Stop", gives a good account of himself as an aviator, but I was somehow troubled by the fact that he never looked or acted like anybody named Yang Sun. There were other good contributions by Gerald Hiken, Jane Hoffman, Nancy Marchand, Zero Mostel, Logan Ramsey, Gene Saks and Jerry Stiller, but again I wondered why, if the Chinese angle were so important to the message, so little effort had been made to make the characters legitimate. Why, in fact, couldn't the whole thing have been set in Brooklyn or Berlin?

Speaking of sets, the ones by Wolfgang Roth are of the greatest simplicity and good taste, allowing the proceedings to move rapidly by the simple raising and lowering of curtains and slides. And it seemed to me that Mr. Bentley, the adapter, acquitted himself nobly as director.

The new offering at the Phoenix is, however, too abstruse and generally ostentatious to be popularly acceptable. But it is also a courageous experiment, a worthy off-Broadway endeavor, and as such deserves the clinical examination of many dedicated theatregoers.

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER
December 19, 1956

'Good Woman of Setzuan' a Big Clashing of Symbols and a Bore

By JOHN CHAPMAN

It strikes me that the eagermaniacs of the Phoenix Theatre—the devoted and some times talented actors and the two managers, T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton—have been drifting farther and farther away from reality and farther and farther away from the original admirable concept of the Phoenix. Last evening's new production, "The Good Woman of Setzuan," was an appalling bore for its first half, which is the only half I saw, and, with two or three exception, was staffed by repulsive actors.

This production was "Little Theatre" or "Experimental Theatre" in an aggravated state of juvenility, and with it the Phoenix lost almost all the remnants of the great respect I once had for its aims and accomplishments.

Good Bad Girl

"The Good Woman of Setzuan" is by the late Bertold Brecht, the German who wrote a successful Greenwich Village adaptation of "The Beggar's Opera." The English adaptation and direction are by Eric Bentley. The music, by Paul Dessau, is insistently dissonant and not very good.

The story is purportedly Chinese, but I'll bet two yen that few denizens of Mott St. could understand it better than I do—which is not at all. Three Chinese gods come to the village of Setzuan looking for a good person, and a prostitute (played by Uta Hagen) seems to be a likely bet. (The affinity of playwrights for prosties is more a matter for psychoanalysts than play reviewers.) Pretty soon Miss Hagen puts on a mask, a derby hat and a pair of pants and turns into her own uncle. Why a girl would want to be her own uncle is beyond my feeble mind.

Must Mean Something

There are many characters in "The Good Woman of Setzuan," like Wife, Husband, Unemployed, Carpenter and Carpet Dealer's Wife, and I suppose they all symbolize something as they show off their makeups and costumes on the uneasy stage of the Phoenix. Perhaps the late Mr. Brecht and the current Prof. Bentley have figured them as symbols of Humanity or something else grand and meaningful.

I can remember when the Phoenix did truly imaginative theatre pieces like "Madam, Will You Walk" and "The Golden Apple."

The New York Times
December 19, 1956

Theatre: 'Good Woman of Setzuan' at Phoenix

Brecht Play Is Staged by Eric Bentley

By BROOKS ATKINSON

THERE'S one obvious thing that can be said about Bertolt Brecht's "The Good Woman of Setzuan," which opened at the Phoenix last evening. It's interesting.

It is an example of the kind of nonrealistic play that he called "epic theatre." If that is ambiguous or forbidding, it might as well be called a morality play, written by the cynic who did the libretto for "The Threepenny Opera."

For "The Good Woman of Setzuan" illustrates the theory that it is impossible to do good without doing evil, or at least taking advantage of the evil that any quantity of people are prepared to contribute to a cause that yields them a profit. Call it a modern version of Voltaire's "Candide," and you will not be wide of the mark.

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The form of "The Good Woman or Setzuan" is particularly interesting. For Brecht dispensed with the drama of illusion and invented a form of didactic story-telling with multiple changes of scene, occasional speeches directed frankly to the audience, and songs.

Even if Brecht were still alive, it would have been impossible for him to supervise the production here. For he was a Communist who finished his career as the leading man of the theatre in East Berlin. The present text and the current performance are the work of Eric Bently, Brander Matthews Professor of Drama at Columbia, author, editor, anthologist, librettist, critic and intellectual at large.

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This column is not in a position to compare Mr. Bentley's text with the original, or his direction with the sort of staging that Brecht developed with his own company. But it is easy to imagine that Brecht's German poetry had more grace than Mr. Bentley's English verses, that his dialogue had more sting and his staging greater virtuosity.

But we are dealing here with what is on view at the Phoenix. "The Good Woman of Setzuan" is just the sort of thing that the Phoenix ought to produce. It is strange in form, nonsentimental in theme and stimulating from several points of view. Using bamboo poles and screens, Wolfgang Roth has designed a first-rate setting that breaks with the conventions and keeps pace with the fluidity of the story-telling.

Since the cast is a long one, the performance is almost bound to be unwieldy, for the Phoenix always has to "open cold." But the principal parts are extraordinarily well played. As the good woman, who has to double in brass as a man of evil, Uta Hagen gives another one of her forceful, flowing performances with intelligent character definition. Zero Mostel's broad style is perfect for the part of a middle-aged scoundrel. Albert Salmi's physical vitality and callow manner bring alive the part of a boyish opportunist. As an unscrupulous landlady, Nancy Marchand's stealthy walk and furtive glance compose an excellent character portrait.

Although "The Good Woman of Setzuan" is a scornful, hard-headed, contemptuous satire on virtuous illusions, this department takes ironic note of two of the theatre's oldest pieces of hokum. Who is the good woman of Setzuan who is kind to everybody, generous, selfless, understanding? She is our oldest theatre friend: the prostitute with a heart of gold.

Uta Hagen, Salmi and Mostel in the Cast

And when she discovers that she is pregnant, what sex do you suppose the child will be? A boy, naturally. For the pregnant woman on the stage, as well as the prospective father, love to talk fondly of a "son." In this case, the pregnant woman's fantasy about "my son" leads into a little dance pantomime that is about as cloying as you could find in the old-fashioned tear-jerker.

But no matter. For "The Good Woman of Setzuan" is an original excursion into a kind of theatre that has many possibilities. Brecht was right in breaking with the naturalistic convention, and he had the talent to make something positive out of a rebellious point of view. Whatever else the play may be, it is interesting.